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Power Relations in China: Who's on First?

Few topics elicit more controversy and comment than attempts at explaining "who does what to whom" in China. Differences abound and China watchers spend endless hours debating the latest fragmentary pieces of evidence. Currently, Deng Xiaoping's plans for an orderly succession are much discussed. One school of thought contends that Deng has grown disenchanted with his original choice of Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang as his successors and has begun to position a "Third Echelon" of younger leaders to replace them. Another school views the emergence of the "Third Echelon" as essentially non-threatening and strengthening Hu's and Zhao's hand in the succession process. Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew [redacted] 25X1
[redacted] belongs to this second school. 25X1

It's frame of reference relies heavily on interpreting any new data about power relations within a culturally based analytic framework that attempts to sift out mirror imaging western concepts and experiences and put events in a Chinese context. Professors Lucian Pye (MIT) and Richard Solomon (RAND) are two of the most ardent American proponents of this school's approach. Pye, in his book, The Dynamics of Chinese Politics, attempts to explain how the "...Chinese elite, behind their conspiracy of consensus, carry out their politics and their decisionmaking." His central hypothesis is that the:

> "...fundamental dynamics of Chinese politics is a continuous tension between the imperative of consensus and conformity, on the one hand, and the belief, on the other hand, that one can find security only in special, particularistic relationships, which by their very nature tend to threaten the principle of consensus. These particularistic ties tend to produce factions...."

Seniority and age as one variable and "guanxi," a concept which describes the intense personal bonds of acquaintanceship and mutual belonging in Chinese culture as another, are important in operationalizing this theory and understanding the importance of factions in Chinese politics. This school also views status in the Communist Party, particularly membership on the Standing Committee of the Politburo, as a useful way of testing the hypothesis and assessing power relationships within the elite. We may not know or understand, for example, all the details of what is going on behind the scenes in China, but we can usefully study the results of who emerges at the top of the pyramid for insights and for breathing life into our predictions.

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The picture that emerges from such an exercise is a China ruled from the top by a small group of leaders on the Standing Committee of the Politburo that arrives at decisions through informal consensus building and factional alignments. A premium is placed on personal relationships--quanxi--and networking these relationships into positions of political power and influence. Membership on the Standing Committee alone does not provide an absolute measure of a leader's clout, but is a minimum requirement for those jockeying for ultimate authority. Typically, a single leader, by virtue of his guanxi with a majority on the Standing Committee and the prominence of his network as members of the Politburo and Central Committee, emerges as the first among equals. Usually, in this quest, age and seniority are particularly important. And, the greater the grip of his network on key party and government positions, the greater his absolute power. In fact, the ability to place factional cohorts in positions of importance is both a sign and a necessary element for maintaining one's power in China.

Deng Xiaoping has demonstrated convincingly that he is a master at manipulating this highly personal and ofttimes informal system of leadership and decisionmaking. Although the specific moves he made in achieving the status of first among equals are not known with certainty, the outlines of his triumph are clearly discernible. He first successfully promoted Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang to the Standing Committee isolating his chief rival Chen Yun and enhancing his own ability to dictate the course of consensus building. More recently, Ye Jianying's retirement from the Standing Committee and the departure of many other lesser figures in the pyramid below have increased his authority even more. Preliminary analysis suggests that most of the replacements came from Deng's network of personal relationships. Equally important, many of the "Third Echelon" he has chosen seem to be closely tied to Hu and Zhao. In a number of key instances, it is their proteges that have been promoted.

Deng's consolidation of authority, therefore, appears to strengthen Hu's and Zhao's chances for survival as the top leaders after his death. They may prove to be less adept at manipulating the system than their mentor, and thus only transitional figures, but he certainly will leave them with a huge advantage over their would-be rivals. At least for now, Deng is definitely on "first", Hu and Zhao are safely on "second," and many of the "Third Echelon" are cheering them on from the dugout.